

# SOCIAL ACTION

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OCTOBER 15, 1946



**A Theology of Social Action**  
by PAUL RAMSEY

# SOCIAL ACTION Magazine

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## CONTENTS

THEOLOGY UNCHAINED, <i>A Preface by Douglas Horton</i>	3
A THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL ACTION, <i>by Paul Ramsey</i>	4
THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM	4
FAITH AND WORKS	17
LOVE AND WORKS	27
GOOD READING	34
SOCIAL SCENE, <i>by Alfred W. Swan</i>	<i>back cover</i>

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# Theology Unchained

"A Theology of Social Action" is an important and timely article which I hope may be read by thousands.

Is the Christian Church an exclusive company which has no concern for the world outside? Safe in its own salvation, is it careless of the fate of the vast humanity beyond its walls?

Congregational Christians and all Christians of similar insight unite their voices to say *no*. The Church believes that the God and Father of its Lord Jesus Christ is the final arbiter of the affairs of both heaven and earth. For that reason it is interested in those affairs to the depths of its being.

Earthly authorities—national governments, party chiefs, directors of industry, labor leaders, propagandists of race, denominational officials—may act as if they were utterly independent of God. But group selfishness, in this God's world, leads inevitably to catastrophe.

On the other hand, when such authorities acknowledge that their powers derive from the Father of all mankind and devote themselves to the doing of His will, they tend (in spite of all the mistakes into which their human blindness may lead them) to create a cooperative and peaceful world in which life can come to fullness.

This is the message the Church has for the world. As Suzanne de Dietrich puts it: "Every authority we see either *derives* from God or is in revolt *against* God." The Church therefore works to strengthen institutions of every kind which seek to make the will of God prevail—and constantly warns those who ignore or defy that will that they are en route to disaster and death. The God of love will never force His way upon us, but in every chain of cause and effect in history He teaches—and His Church points out—that His way alone leads to social salvation.

Social Action, as Paul Ramsey makes abundantly clear, is theology unchained and alive, warning, building, witnessing.

—Douglas Horton

# A Theology of Social Action

By PAUL RAMSEY

## The Coming of the Kingdom

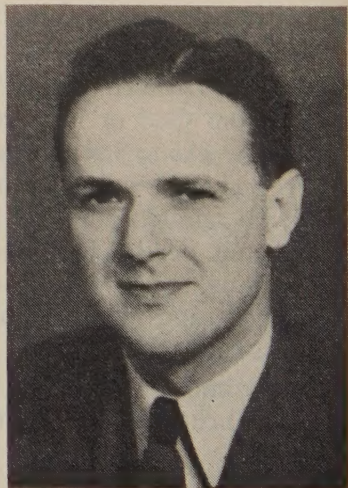
Programs for Christian "social action" are in large measure grounded in the fact that all thoughtful Christians today have departed from the mind of Jesus of Nazareth and no longer share certain of his views. And it is right that we no longer believe as he believed not simply in minor matters but also concerning some things he considered of central importance.

### *The End of "This Present Age"*

We are correct, most especially, in no longer thinking as Jesus thought about the immediate end of "this present age" and the coming of the kingdom of God. One of the main foundations and incentives for social action among us is the need for social control and some sort of restraint of evil to take the place left vacant by our rejection of Jesus' "eschatological" expectation. By "eschatological" (*eschaton*, the end) is meant Jesus' confident belief that God would soon, suddenly and catastrophically

## THE AUTHOR

Dr. Paul Ramsey, Assistant Professor of Religious Thought at Princeton University, is one of a growing number of young men who have trained themselves in both the social sciences and theology. His articles in such journals as *Christendom*, *Religion in Life*, and *Ethics* have brought fresh and timely insights to the relationships of democracy and Christianity, the social and theological roots of liberalism, and the social implications of Christianity. Dr. Ramsey has taught at Garrett Biblical Institute and Millsaps College.





cally intervene to disrupt the order of life prevailing in this present age and to inaugurate by his own power alone a kingdom of righteousness. This belief is no longer held by modern Christian thinkers, except in highly sophisticated and attenuated forms. But in the mind of Jesus this belief was of crucial importance. Only by recognizing Jesus' kingdom-expectation can the remainder of his teachings, and especially his ethical commandments, be understood rightly. Jesus did not think that the Gospel of Love would be sufficient to resolve the totality of evil in many life-situations, or to defeat the demonic power of evil that encompasses even those personal relationships which are in themselves amenable to love's persuasion. As a matter of fact, remarks a leading New Testament scholar,

... the practice of Jesus' ethical teaching had in his mind nothing whatever to do with bringing the kingdom to pass. God was going to do that—and he was going to do it almost at once. . . . God was going to bring in the kingdom, and he was going to bring it with power. . . . Jesus, although he enjoined non-violence upon his followers, did not attribute non-violence to God. Only God's power would suffice to destroy the forces of wickedness. . . . Coercion would be needed, but it would be God's coercion, not man's.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Kingdom of God Is Appearing*

The same writer continues: "The moral precepts of Jesus we listen to, although we do not keep them; but the eschatological teachings we do not hear at all."<sup>2</sup> Yet Jesus' expectation of the immediate end of the kingdoms of this world qualifies all his teachings. No wonder, then, that the ethical teachings have only a sentimental meaning for us, and a meaning vastly different from the significance they had when they were borne in upon the mind of man in the context of the inbreaking kingdom. We say that Jesus' call to the strenuous way of limitless love lays down a method for making all the world a kingdom

1. John Knox, "Re-examining Pacifism" in *Religion and the Present Crisis*, ed. by John Knox. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1942, pp. 39-40.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

of God and is to be responded to with this end in view. For Jesus, however, the reverse was the case: the kingdom of God is already effectively here and therefore the strenuous teachings may now be lived out. Since "it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," men may now "fear not" and their love and forgiveness be unrestricted. The fact that these teachings can be obeyed, and indeed that they are even announced by Jesus, are "signs" that the kingdom is appearing. More swift than predictive "observation" could determine, it is already present with power in the midst of men. Secretly though not gradually it has established God's "bridgeheads" in the present age, of which the teachings themselves are the most momentous. The fact that anyone is now willing to follow precepts requiring radical obedience has nothing to do with bringing the kingdom; it is merely an indication that such a person is prepared to receive the kingdom and willing that God's will now be done.

Apparently Jesus did not think that the way of love, which it was his and his disciples' *vocation* to practice, would by itself be able to deal with evil, or, in modern terms, was all the "social action" needed. It is plain that Jesus considered the area in which evil could be overcome by good to be a limited one. He thought, of course, that it was the business of his disciples to operate only in the area where evil could be overcome by non-resistance; but this decision depended for support precisely on his expectation that God was already actively bringing this evil time to an end. Jesus believed that the general forces of evil in human history were going to be dealt with as a separate function by God himself, and were even now being decisively confronted by the kingdom-power. There is thus a specialization of tasks: while Christians love evil out of existence and exercise attitudes creative of good, thus extending the community of those who are ready for the kingdom, God will destroy evil with righteous vengeance. Whether by Messianic battle or day of judgment, in any case the future is full of Messianic woes.



### *Alternatives for the Contemporary Christian*

Once the teachings of Jesus are lifted out of the context of his eschatology there are two directions in which Christian thought and decision may move. Both of these are alike guilty of departing from the mind of Jesus. The two alternatives can best be illustrated in the area of Christian social action in wartime. In the first place, as Christians we can extend the field in which the ethic of non-resistance is supposed to be applicable. We can say that to love, to suffer and to do good in the face of armed injustice is "God's method of dealing with evil" in its entirety. If we do so, we say something Jesus would not have said; he did not attribute such power to love and non-violence. To make the simple teachings of Jesus cover the whole ground of action necessary to restrain or eliminate evil is not "the religion of Jesus"; it is an ethic or "religion about Jesus."

The other alternative is to justify the employment of force in dealing with tyrannical structures of evil. This involves the substitution of human power-controls for Divine power and, it may be, humanly directed violence for the Divine violence entailed literally in Jesus' eschatological expectation. God's coercive intervention to deal with general evil may be replaced by concrete legislative measures, governmental institutions, and other responsible human arrangements, which then stand in exactly the same relation to the love-ethic as did the divine intervention which Jesus expected. Although on this view the Christian will take a responsibility for the restraint of evil which Jesus himself never allowed to be a part of Christian vocation, it has the merit of claiming for the love ethic only the limited, if positively creative, function Jesus assigned it.

### *The Answer of the Social Gospel*

The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was concerned with Christian social action relative to all the problems of modern society, and it is to be understood as taking the second of the two alternatives

that have been discussed. "Social Christianity" very plainly leaves something out of Jesus' viewpoint, namely his primitive eschatology. And equally as plainly, although not as consciously or deliberately, the "social gospel" adds something to Jesus, something not contained in Jesus' outlook precisely because the eschatology was there. The task, reserved in Jesus' thought for the direct and immediate action of God, of putting down by force the kingdoms of this world, restraining evil in its large historical forms, and guaranteeing, where love cannot extend, a kingdom of relative righteousness and peace—this task is to be performed, according to the "social gospel," by economic reform and planning, legislation, direct action, political pressure, and, if possible, the institutional organization of international community. Programs for contemporary Christian social action, which are rooted chiefly in the social gospel movement, are therefore grounded in very large measure in the fact that thoughtful Christians no longer share Jesus' eschatology.

### *Rauschenbusch as an Example*

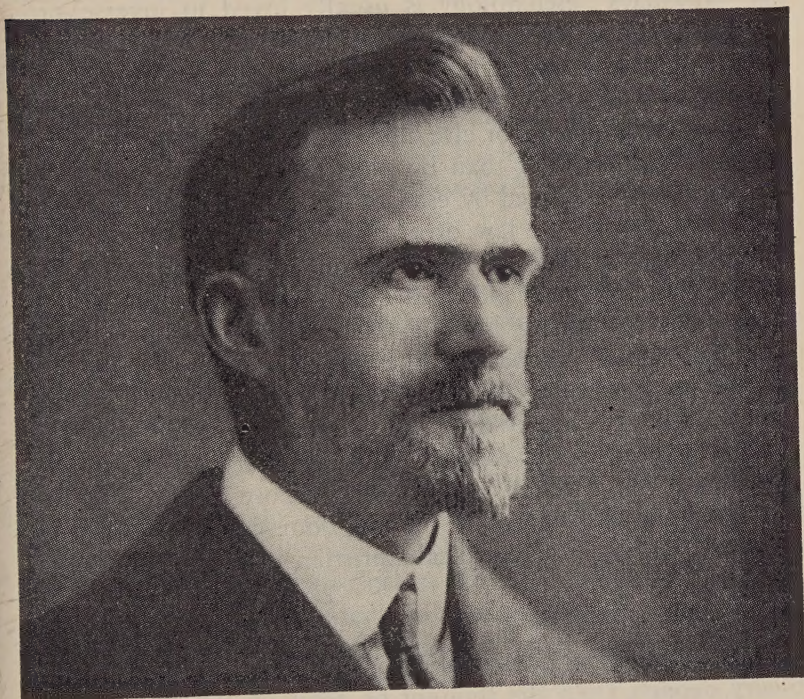
This point is sun-clear in the thought of Walter Rauschenbusch, who was the leading exponent of social Christianity in the period before the first world war. Rauschenbusch recaptured the meaning of the New Testament term when he insisted that the "kingdom of God" was not a "spiritual" state of affairs, a condition of inward blessedness or the heavenly abode of immortal souls, but a real social order in which men have relationships with one another that are social and physical as well as mutually edifying. He also taught that a real power or kingdom of evil opposes the kingdom of God, and, no supine optimist, he affirmed that "a solidaristic consciousness of sin and evil . . . is necessary for the religious mind."<sup>3</sup>

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3. Walter Rauschenbusch: *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: Macmillan, 1917, p. 90.



## WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH



"The coming of the Kingdom of God will not be by peaceful development only, but by conflict with the Kingdom of Evil. We should estimate the power of sin too lightly if we forecast a smooth road. Nor does the insistence on continuous development eliminate the possibility and value of catastrophes. Political and social revolutions may shake down the fortifications of the Kingdom of Evil in a day." (From *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.)

How to move our society, or how history is to move, from the kingdom of evil to the kingdom of God was for him the chief problem to which Christianity addresses itself. Rauschenbusch declared that primitive eschatology was "the religious equivalent of a wholesome revolution in which the oppressing class is eliminated and the righteous poor get relief."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he rejected any literal belief in "the end of history"

4. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

as unacceptable in the light of modern scientific views, noting that nowadays "eschatology is usually loved in inverse proportion to the square of the mental diameter of those who do the loving."<sup>5</sup> Dropping literal eschatology, Rauschenbusch had then to substitute some other agency for the divine agency in bringing the kingdom, or else God must be conceived as acting in some manner other than by catastrophic intervention. The place formerly occupied by eschatology is in fact filled out by two things: (1) "the law of evolutionary development," and (2) humanly directed political action and economic reform. The second of these indicates a new agent—man—who is responsible for giving himself the kingdom, while the first naturalizes and gradualizes the divine agency. Thus, the definitive statement of the social gospel in American Christian thought allows humanly directed political action and economic reform set, within the context of evolutionary gradualism, to supplant divine intervention for the purpose of dealing with evil in the large, bringing in the kingdom, and providing support and vindication for radical Christian love.

### *Between Two Kingdoms*

As illustrated in Rauschenbusch, a modern Christian social theory departs from the thought of Jesus on the point of his eschatology, and in large measure the function of social action in such a theory is to take the place of eschatology. The measures adopted by Christian social action are not first of all for the implementation of Christian love. They rather serve the purpose of negative restraint, of eliminating glaring evil.

In crucial life situations the immediate disciples of Jesus could ask, "What would Jesus do, or have me do?"—precisely because they expected God himself to do otherwise. The rejection of literal eschatology, it must be frankly confessed, makes it necessary for modern men to put to themselves the additional question, "What would God—precisely none other

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 209.



than the God of Jesus Christ—do, or have me do?” Doubtless the danger of presumption here is very great, but the responsibility is also great. No matter how much Christians may desire that love directly qualify all their actions, they must nevertheless undertake to stand on the borderline of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and attempt to do something about the kingdoms of this world, holding back the kingdom of evil in them.

Jesus, too, stood on the borderline between these kingdoms, but in a different sense. Because in his view God was taking care of the kingdoms of this present age and himself bringing in the kingdom of righteousness, Jesus could devote himself entirely to the task of being what man was to become and teaching men in radical fashion to renounce their connections with this present age and in limitless love to prepare for the coming great day. Thus, Jesus did not bring the kingdom; the kingdom brought Jesus, and the urgency and the wholeness of his own understanding of “standing on the border” made him the absolute disclosure of what God’s reign means. But we are not the Revealer; and this is the same thing as to say that we do not stand altogether where he stood. Christian social action, which is “an ethic about Jesus” and not simply “the ethics of Jesus,” has something fundamental to do about restraining evil and, in this negative sense, bringing in the kingdom, which for Jesus was God’s business.

### *The Valid Element in Biblical Eschatology*

One aspect of Biblical eschatology is permanently valid and must always be an element in Christian social theory: it is God, and not we ourselves, who brings the kingdom nearer. Nothing man does can actually bring the kingdom, even though he must assume the task of restraining and holding within bounds the kingdoms of evil. This leaves room within Christian social theory for the inclusion of a recognition that God is living and faithful, that he is the prime mover in all that is really “finished” for good.

### *Preparation for the Kingdom*

Christian social action then, no matter how extensive or successful and no matter what its effective instruments are, finds its place in preparing men to receive the kingdom, not in accomplishing it. There are two sorts of preparation, one positive, the other negative. The deepening of Christian love in ourselves and in the Christian fellowship and the practice of radical obedience or forgiveness makes us ready in positive quality of life to receive the kingdom. This Jesus thought sufficient. To add, as modern men must do, that we must also make responsible use of restraints and institutional reform to put down evil is not necessarily to imagine that thereby we are inaugurating God's reign. Thereby we simply prepare our common life, and our own social selves, to receive the kingdom, and this is itself an effective sign of God's claim upon us.

Christian social action does not anticipate the divine judgment or God's ultimate salvation by separating the wheat from the tares. Nor does it, as Jesus advised, simply let them grow together until the harvest. It rather "cultivates the garden" in order to keep down the tares, desiring in this sense also as well as in Christian love to be ready when the Lord comes. Christian social action does not itself create the good life, but it must hinder all hindrances to the good life. Such action can doubtless make the world a happier place or it can at least make life that is nearest to us less servile to particular evils. But there is no guarantee that happier community life will be better in the ultimate sense that God will reign in our joys through a real increase of Christlike love.

### *A "Negative Social Gospel"*

There is an analogy here to Hocking's treatment of pragmatism in philosophy. It is not true, says Hocking, that ideas or propositions are true if they work, but it is true that those which will not stand the test of practice are not true. This is "negative pragmatism." Similarly, a Christian social theory must be a "negative social gospel." While no particular pro-



gram for social action can bring the kingdom, it is nevertheless true that without social action the kingdoms of this world, and men in them, cannot be made ready to have God's will done in their midst.

It is not necessarily true that by feeding starving Europeans we are building the kingdom; but no one, ourselves or they, will be prepared for the kingdom unless out of our abundance they are fed. A bottle of milk every day for every person along the Danube will not bring in the kingdom of God, but a world in which all effort has not been expended to provide for all their daily calcium will hardly be a world to which the kingdom will draw near. Although with God all things are possible, it is hard for a rich man and nation, or a hungry one, to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The spread of leisure to the laboring masses need not truly result in good; it may simply lead to the entire triumph of canned amusement over culture and stimulated enjoyment over personal integrity. Everything depends on what is done with what we by social action can effect.

### *The Risks of Freedom*

In other words, there is free play between programs of social action and the good they actually accomplish. The spirit of man transcends everything that is aimed at his improvement, every external influence or program for social betterment. Feuerbach, the great precursor of Marxism, once wrote:

The doctrine of foods is of great ethical significance. Food becomes blood, blood becomes heart, thoughts and mind-stuff. Human fare is the foundation of human culture and thought. Would you improve a nation? Give it instead of declamations against sin, better food; man is what he eats.

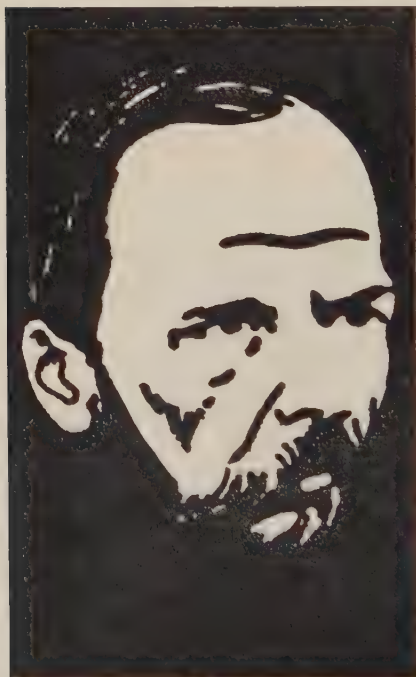
This is simply not true. Not of man. Man is a spirit. He is "the animal with red cheeks," the blushing animal, able in self-consciousness to be aware of his wrong-doing or defiantly to resist being improved by others. The difficulty with "social planning" is not simply, Who plans the planners? but also,

How can a kingdom be planned at all for *man* who is always more than he eats and more than the planners can possibly calculate? Man possesses spiritual freedom; nay, more, he *is* a finite instance of freedom. Therefore, the kingdom of God which is addressed to man is more than what people eat, and is not brought about by what they eat. It requires declamations against sin—the foolishness of preaching—as well as direct action upon the outside of human beings. Inside man's bloodstream is still outside his spirit.

Dostoevsky had a true view of human nature when through the man from the "underworld" he represents the underworld in every man speaking against "crystal palace" utopias:

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### FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY



"What are we to expect from man, seeing he is a creature endowed with such strange qualities? You may heap upon him every earthly blessing, you may submerge him in well-being until the bubbles shoot to the surface of his prosperity as though it were a pond, you may give him such economic success that nothing will be left for him to do but to sleep and to eat dainties and to prate about the continuity of the world's history; yes, you may do all this, but none the less, out of sheer ingratitude, sheer devilment, he will end by playing you some dirty trick." (From *Letters from the Underworld*.)



. . . you are persuaded in your own minds that man is bound to improve as soon as ever he has dropped some old, bad customs of his, and allowed science and healthy thought alone to nourish, to act as the normal directors of, human nature. Yes, I know that you are persuaded that eventually man will cease *to err on set purpose*. . . .

Consequently, I would ask you—what are we to expect from man, seeing he is a creature endowed with such strange qualities? You may heap upon him every earthly blessing, you may submerge him in well-being until the bubbles shoot to the surface of his prosperity as though it were a pond, you may give him such economic success that nothing will be left for him to do but to sleep and to eat dainties and to prate about the continuity of the world's history; yes, you may do all this, but none the less, out of sheer ingratitude, sheer devilment, he will end by playing you some dirty trick.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Kingdom of Evil Within Man*

In the spirit of man and his freedom is a kingdom of evil which man himself cannot eradicate either from others or from himself. Years before Socrates had pushed his studies of man so far as to conclude that virtue is teachable because it is a kind of knowledge, the Bible had plumbed still deeper to declare that the human heart "is more inscrutable than anything, and incurably diseased,"<sup>7</sup> that sin is "obduracy of heart," and that only God, and not even a man himself, can know it altogether.

This being so, social action can be no more than preparatory. It must stop short of bringing men into the kingdom of God or of bringing the kingdom into history. Our knowledge of the future is finite; we cannot by taking thought trammel up the consequences of a present decision so as to know with certainty that a given action is right. But even supposing for the moment that uncertainties due to the limitations of our knowledge are overcome, there still would be an important

6. Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Letters from the Underworld*. Everyman edition (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.), pp. 29, 36.

7. Jeremiah xvii:9.

variable in the human situation itself—the freedom of innumerable persons (including our own future selves) exercised with indefinite degrees of sin or saving faith. We cannot know or control what people with spiritual freedom will themselves do with what we now do. Indeed, we cannot tell what in the future *we* may do with what *now* we are doing, how we ourselves may rob the future of the fair hope we now give to it.

### *The Kingdom Is Always Coming*

We cannot by anything we do bring in the kingdom because we cannot now know or control what we ourselves or others will do with what we are now doing. In order for any of our good works to be saved from the corruptions of sin and from new incorporation into a kingdom of evil, there must take place moment by moment in ourselves and others a *repeated* Christianization of what we *then* are doing. The kingdom is always *coming* into what we do, not by what we do; and unless it comes, what we have done to make the earth fair will not be sustained in goodness.

This is the meaning of the Biblical teaching that God is the living and primal mover of all things that are ultimately good, that it is he who reigns in the coming of the kingdom. In other words, the kingdom comes by the “repetition” in human life and history of a personally engaging relationship between men and Christ. Hereby alone is it determined that those who are good humble themselves to walk with God. Hereby also comes about from beyond themselves that men may do well with what they have done, and thus the kingdom repeatedly impinges upon social action.

### *Individual vs. Social Salvation*

The objection may be raised that this amounts to a return to a doctrine of “individual” salvation after an era of “social” salvation, and in a sense it is. Individuals are necessarily the focus of all redemptive processes, man being a spirit capable



of transcending all social processes, the creator and bearer of history rather than its patient. However, there need be no return to merely individual salvation, since there are no *mere* individuals. The individual may be the focus of redemption, but that focus is also a vital center of social influences and counter-influences. Not all salvation is *derived from* social relationships although all salvation *arises with* and in the context of such relations. Not an isolated soul but social man is condemned by viewing himself in the mirror of the Word, and repeatedly saved by relation to Christ.

## Faith and Works

In addition to the idea of the "kingdom," a theology of social action must also understand the significance of Christian "faith" and "love."

An emphasis on faith was the foundation of the Protestant Reformation. By the immediate availability of God to every believer through faith, the Reformers did away with the necessity of priestly mediation and special channels of grace in the sacraments of the Church. At the same time they abolished the distinction between sacred and secular areas of life, between special duties owed to God and ethical duties toward man, between specially meritorious religious vocations and the tasks of Christians in the world. All useful vocations, they said, are sacred and have religious merit. Duties to one's neighbors *are* duties to God. There is no special class of religious obligations; all obligations are religious. For Protestantism, there can be no going back to a Catholic distinction of *area* between things secular and things religious.

### *The Division of Devotion*

Nevertheless there is widespread among Protestants today a similar distinction with respect to *energy* and *devotion*. Unfortunately this distinction has accompanied the contemporary

revival of emphasis on "faith" among the neo-orthodox, and is especially prevalent among tintured liberals, the self-styled "chastened" ones. "Faith" is defined as a human energy directed toward God, while "love" is an energy directed toward God and man, and "works" are energy directed toward man. There is no division of the ground into separate areas of activity, but still the view prevails that a Christian ought to hold in proper proportion the energy he devotes to God in faith and love and that directed toward man in loving works. The latter must be kept under severe ration controls lest, by undue devotion to man or trust in some program for social action, a Christian commit the sin of "idolatry."

The resulting description of a Christian at work in collective social action is that of a man who is not very enthusiastic. He sees "pagan" comrades falling over their heels to get things done, believing unreservedly in their common project, and trusting its outcome as beneficial. The Christian, however, is too worldly-wise to believe much in anything in the world. His faith is in God, and only a certain modicum of spiritual energy remains for his task on earth. Having ultimate trust in some other world, social programs cannot really engage him, or at least they *ought* not. He cooperates, of course, in all worthwhile community endeavors but looks with religious cynicism upon anyone who thinks something significant can in time be accomplished. At all cost, he must not have great faith in any finite object or trust anything human.

Such a view is quite prevalent among those whose grasp of Reformation thought goes only so far as to withdraw them from infinite concern for things human. Chastened liberals hold on to their liberalism while at the same time moving in the direction of orthodoxy by the device of dividing their spiritual energy, devotion, and enthusiasm. This is tragic for liberalism and rests, moreover, upon a grave misunderstanding of Protestant orthodoxy, particularly of the notion "faith" or "trust."

## The Reader Writes

Contributions to this department, a regular feature of the magazine, will be welcomed. Unless it is specified otherwise, any communications addressed to the Editors will be considered available for publication. Letters should be brief, and the Editors reserve the right to omit portions without changing the sense. Unsigned letters will not be published, except where anonymity is obviously warranted. Address communications to the Editors, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven 11, Connecticut.

### Ministers as Citizens

*(Editor's Note: Since the publication of "This Is Your Congress" in September, 1946, the following letter has been brought to our attention. We publish it here, despite the fact that its author has long since finished his distinguished career, because it is highly germane to the times. To our knowledge, it has never been published anywhere previously. Its special references to the New England clergy might well be extended to cover all ministers.)*

*We like to think that if Henry Ward Beecher were alive he would be a regular contributor to "The Reader Writes.")*

December, 1856

My dear Sir:

Allow me first to thank you for that sound sense which leads you to judge that, in such a time as this, a clergyman should be interested and active in the affairs of the public.

That is genuine, old New England doctrine. From the beginning, the ministers of New England have felt it to be a part of their duty to be interested in whatever interested the commonwealth. They have, as a body of citizens, taken active and considerate interest in political matters. Not as a class, not leagued together for church-interests but as *citizens*. To make it odious for a clergyman to be a citizen is to compel him to become a hierarch. In a democratic community, it is not safe for any body of men to live above or outside of the circle of common citizenship. . . . When men speak of political duty as degrading to a minister, they dishonor and degrade our institutions and our primary ideas of citizenship. It ought to be an honor to serve the State in the ranks. It ought to be taught in the family, in the school, and in the pulpit, that it is a fault, a sin, for any man to be unconcerned in political duties. . . . When the framing of laws, the election of magistrates, the discussion of public civil interests, and the sacred function of the Vote, are



regarded as degrading to a religious man, the Republic is already on the broad road to destruction!

We must exalt citizenship. We must make its duties sacred. We must excuse no man from the full performance. And above all, we must be true to our original democratic ideas, and regard all citizens, without distinction of class or profession, as standing upon a common platform; none so low as to lose the prerogatives of citizenship and none so high or so sacred as to be exempt from the common duties of citizens. These ideas I have received from the fathers. They come to us from the days of Milton, of Robinson, of Hampden and Vane. No man brings to the ballot-box anything but the simple citizen. Election day unclothes every man. The vote strips every citizen of his professional robes, when he goes to the polls he is neither governor, senator, lawyer, minister, or scholar; he is not farmer, mechanic, or laborer; but only a citizen and a man. Moralists have long been wont to declare that in the grave, all men are equal. But our Fathers, with a nobler feeling, declared that men are equal at the Ballot-Box, long before they reached that precinct when every man casts his one final vote for Eternity!

... The doctrines of Civil Liberty, to New England Ministers, have always borne the sacredness of religious truths, and political duty, with them, has always been moral duty. In New England above all the Earth, the Church has borrowed nothing of the State, but lent her much. The State has stood broad and firm as the hills. Religion has rolled in her own superior firmament casting down like the sun, the light of day and the flame of summer, to make all those hills fruitful!

It is the corrupt politician whom we need to fear, the old hackneyed men of parties who have rubbed off all faith of political virtue, in the

constant practice of political gambling! It is our eminent lawyers that we should fear, keen in verbal criticism, who take no counsel from generous impulses, from the honest faith of popular feeling, but only from technical pleadings; men, with whom reasoning is not the sounding of the depths of Moral Consciousness, but only the thrust and parry of words. It is our Venerable Judges, that we should fear, who have little by little, construction by construction, well nigh bound the wings of Liberty or shut her up in the Constitution and made her an imprisoned song-bird. It is our statesmen that lead us into temptation, who for the bribe of presidential honors, will disown the doctrines of their whole life, and cast aside their faith like an ill-fitting coat, and make themselves pliant to every influence of power, as in an osier to the weaving hand of the basket maker!

Henry Ward Beecher

## Cumulative Contribution

Dear Sirs:

May I take this opportunity to thank you for the great service which *Social Action* renders to social Christianity as a movement. It is making a cumulative contribution not only to intelligent Christian action but also to an ecumenical social theology.

Walter G. Muelder, Dean

Boston University, School of Theology  
Boston, Massachusetts

## A Flicker of Hope

Dear Sirs:

As a social worker, impatient with the social paralysis from which we have been ailing for many decades, I have been critical of the church as an institution. During my lifetime of forty years, it has been dead from the heels up. I was reared on the front pews of a Presbyterian Church,

a daughter of a man who studied for the ministry in Holland and deserted the undertaking for America, where he hoped people might be living more nearly according to the principles in which he believed. He found America a bit yeastier but not much more consistent than his Dutch relatives and friends in Holland. He decided it was more satisfying to grow small vegetables, large scale for wholesale markets in middle Iowa. People would use his gift that served their appetites even as they were willing to starve their souls.

\* \* \*

I've been watching *Social Action* now for a couple of years with growing enthusiasm and I'm getting a flicker of hope about the possibility of the church as an institution through which religion can be taught and practiced. . . . Come what may, the liberal outlook—as I see it—the facts, must win out.

Wilma van Dusseldorp

Rohwer Relocation Center  
McGehee, Arkansas

## Shades of Puritanism

Dear Sirs:

Each month as *Social Action* is published I promise myself that I shall write you a letter telling you what a splendid job you are doing. I think the issues have been marvelous and the editorial standards of the highest. Originality and scholarship have been fused to good effect. I especially like the scientific analysis of the issue on alcoholism and thought your front page most ingenious and provocative, especially because the picture was taken from that scorching, "To Have and Have Not." Shades of Puritanism! More power to you.

Carl Hermann Voss

The Church Peace Union  
New York, New York

## Right to Clear Language

Dear Sirs:

I have just read with high approval and much personal improvement the answers to the question: In What Direction is America Moving?

It is a keen and factual analysis, much deeper than popular ideology. It should be most helpful to many in these confused times.

Because of its major excellence, I am sorry to note the language of paragraph 2 on page 25, with such words as "tentativeness," "tendentiousness," and "overtly." While many Congregationalists are said to take pride in their intellectual superiority, I find them to be about average people, and, of course, there are members of some of the more benighted denominations who read *Social Action*.

In this confused and tragic time, it seems that the peoples of the earth have a right to clear and understandable language from those who speak as leaders. We who have had the advantage of more extensive education, and hold multiple degrees, ought to feel obligated to use such language.

I suppose that for this outburst I will be sentenced to shooting at sunrise on six consecutive mornings. So be it. I could say no other.

Carleton R. Ball

Washington, D.C.

Dear Sirs:

I think the magazine has not heretofore, done enough educational work. Ninety per cent of churchgoers don't know what it is all about, and a small portion of the 10% have positive convictions. Educate, Educate, Educate!

People *act* only when they have strong convictions.

J. K. Ballou

Pastor, First Congregational Church  
Sunnyvale, California

## Average Reader's Profile

Dear Reader:

We thought you would like to have a statistical picture of *Social Action's* subscribers as indicated by the results of a reader interest survey. Because we were unable to sample accurately the people who order special issues of the magazine instead of subscribing regularly, we have excluded them from our survey. Such readers make up over half of our total sales.

Thirty-eight per cent of our regular subscribers are ministers and 11 per cent are teachers—the two most common reader-professions. Seven per cent are business men. Fifty-nine per cent of our subscribers belong to Congregational Christian churches, eight per cent Methodist, seven per cent Presbyterian, U.S.A., three and one-half per cent Northern Baptist, one and seven-tenths Evangelical and Reformed. Twenty and four-fifths per cent are scattered among 17 other denominations.

Sixty-one per cent of our subscribers hold degrees beyond a college A.B. or B.S. Thirty-one per cent went to college or are college graduates, eight per cent are high school graduates. Fifty-six per cent of our subscribers are between the ages of 41 and 50, 14 per cent are between 31 and 40, 18.5 per cent between 21 and 30, and 11.5 per cent below 20 years of age.

Our average subscriber almost never fails to read each issue in its entirety. On the whole, he prefers issues that carry one long analytical article and several short ones, or one long article, to issues that contain many short articles. He never finds the articles hard to understand or too academic, although 11 per cent of our subscribers would like the articles written a little more simply. The average reader prefers

an issue that analyzes a social problem, reports on successful efforts of churches to meet the problem, and describes the moral and religious issues at stake, in contrast to an issue that concentrates on the one of these alone.

If short features are to be added to the magazine he wants more book reviews and prayers or litanies on social themes. But he doesn't want these features if they cut into the space necessary for adequate analysis of each issue's subject. If and when more money is available to the staff for editorial purposes, he wants it spent on writers, not pictures or make-up. He is after content, not appearances.

During the coming year he wants issues to deal principally with two major fields: 1. world peace; and 2. description of effective techniques in domestic social action.

He makes clear that in preference to issues that divide up the magazine into pro and con or "against *status quo*" and "for *status quo*" sections he wants issues that state the facts clearly and honestly and interpret the facts in light of liberal, progressive values.

It is obvious from the above that *Social Action* is not serving as a magazine for the education of the "common man" or woman (even though 10.5 per cent of our subscribers term themselves "housewives"). It is a magazine largely for educators. As such it can and does have great influence without great circulation. It is our hope that some day soon the churches will seek to publish also a magazine on Christian social action that is journalistically developed for mass distribution. As yet, Christians have not thought the task important enough to supply the large funds it will take.

Kenneth Underwood  
Managing Editor



### *Luther on Faith and Works*

Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty* is the classic formulation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as it relates to the freedom of a Christian from all requirements of work-righteousness. Yet this treatise gives absolutely no support for the view that distrust or lack of faith in the beneficent results of social action should be the attitude of a Christian man. In rejecting "good works," Luther carefully distinguishes between the "impious addition" of trust in them and good works themselves. Moreover, when Luther rejects "trust in

### MARTIN LUTHER



"Our faith in Christ does not free us from works, but from false opinions concerning good works, that is, from the foolish presumption that [our own] justification is acquired by works." (From *On Christian Liberty*.)

good works," his every sentence insists that Christians should not trust their good works to pile up benefits *for themselves*. But he enjoins *all possible trust that good works will benefit our neighbors*. To seek salvation by good works means to seek one's personal salvation by attributing merit to himself flowing from his own good works. Luther rightly rejects such religious egoism, but makes his positive position equally clear: A Christian ought to, and will, seek the salvation *of others* by good works (insofar as they are ordered thereto) and will attribute merit to works as *benefiting his neighbor*.

In Luther's view, then, a Christian need not put a halter on his spiritual energies in order to make sure of not trusting anything finite. His real need is to curb his ego, or rather to have his self-concern suspended, in order ever to have as much devotion as he ought to human activity for the benefit of his neighbor. The distinction is between trust in works out of concern for one's own welfare and trust in works out of concern for another. This is the *pons asinorum* of Christian ethics, and one not crossed by the comparatively easy device of moderating one's trust in all things human. Luther in fact makes the somewhat surprising judgment that concern for others directed toward the finite and the this-worldly is preferable to a high spirituality and other-worldliness that remains primarily self-concerned yearning for one's eternal welfare or salvation.

Read with a mind that does not preclude the foregoing interpretation, and one determined not to be mystified by religious terminology but to ask of all terms their meaning, passages in the *Christian Liberty* spring to life. Consider, for example:

If works are sought after as a means to righteousness, . . . and are *done under the false impression that through them you are justified*, they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed, and *this addition to them* makes them no longer good, but truly damnable works. . . . What the works have no power to do, they yet, *by a godless presumption*, through this folly of ours, *pretend* to do, and thus violently force themselves into the office and the glory of grace. We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the

contrary, *we cherish and teach them as much as possible*. We do not condemn them for their own sake, but because of this *godless addition* to them and *the perverse idea* that righteousness is to be sought through them. . . .

Our faith in Christ does not free us from works, but from false opinions concerning good works, that is, from the foolish presumption that [our own] justification is acquired by works.<sup>8</sup>

### *A Parable from Dostoevsky*

A story recounted by Grushenka in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov* puts Luther's religious and ethical analysis into dramatic form:

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; "she once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman." And God answered: "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is." The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her; "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day.<sup>9</sup>

The moral is clear: a good deed *claimed* is not a Christian deed. Yet even a casual deed may have value for others: the onion did not break under the load of its service to others. Deeds of service to others may be trusted, even trusted to be of ultimate worth: until she said that her deed was of worth

8. *Works*, II, 333, 344 (italics mine)

9. Fyodor Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamozov*. Modern Library Giant edition, pp. 369-70.



only as merit to her own salvation, the woman was actually righteous before God and was being pulled out.

### *How Forget Oneself?*

One major point remains for understanding Luther's view of the relation of Christian faith to works, namely, his answer to the question, How does a person come to have such disinterestedness as to be able to plunge wholeheartedly into action on his neighbor's behalf? The comment has been made that here Luther gives ethical teaching and displays psychological insight that are "worthy of profound admiration."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless it is difficult for a modern man to understand, much less sense the profundity of Luther's insight, since the modern mind has so far ceased to be concerned in an agonizing personal way with the problem of sin and forgiveness. What Luther says is simply that, unless and until a man knows himself already to be saved *behind* or prior to his good works, then "he cannot do otherwise, as a serious minded and religious man, than give time and thought to his own state"<sup>11</sup> and seek to save himself rather than to help his neighbor by his good works. On the other hand, "when you know that you have through Christ, a good and gracious God who will forgive your sins and remember them no more, and are *now* a child of eternal blessedness, a lord over heaven and earth with Christ, *then you have nothing more to do than to go about your business and serve your neighbour.*"<sup>12</sup> Faith in God's gracious forgiveness *causes* liberality in us and produces other disinterested good works, while distrust *causes* covetousness and other selfish attitudes. Far from faith or trust in this sense cutting down on the energy one can then half-trustingly give to good works, to the contrary: Faith and trust in God's graciousness are prerequisite to having utmost commitment to and passion for

10. A. C. McGiffert: *Protestant Thought Before Kant*. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942, p. 39-40.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

12. Luther, quoted by McGiffert, *ibid.*, p. 38 (italics mine).

whatever may be of benefit to our neighbors. Otherwise, like the old woman we keep a firm, selfish grasp on the onions we give away. "Our own self-assumed good-works lead us *to and into ourselves*, that we seek only our own benefit and salvation; but God's command *drives us to our neighbor*."<sup>13</sup>

### ***Luther's Endorsement of Social Action***

There can be no stronger statement than that given by Luther of the whole response of a Christian to his neighbor's needs in any social action:

Therefore, in all his works he should be guided by this thought and look to this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, having regard to nothing except the need and advantage of his neighbor. Thus the Apostle commands us to work with our hands that we may give to him who is in need, although he might have said that we should work to support ourselves; he says, however, "that he may have to give to him that needeth." And this is what makes it a Christian work to care for the body, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work to acquire and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need. . . . Lo, this is a truly Christian life, here faith is truly effectual through love; that is, it issues in works of the freest service cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward, and for himself is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith. . . .

I will do nothing in life except what I see is necessary, profitable and salutary to my neighbor.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Fall of Christianity***

The "fall of Christianity" did not occur when, changing its economic action, the early church abandoned the experiment in communism at Jerusalem, nor when, changing its political action, the church came to terms with Constantine's empire, nor when in any age there has taken place a radical change of strategy. Christianity "fell" from the purity of its original social motivation, and repeatedly falls, when love

13. *Works*, II (italics mine).

14. *Works*, II, 335-6, 337-8.

which "seeketh not its own" begins earnestly to seek its own eternal reward. Commenting on a passage from the *Didaché*, Harnack writes:

It is beyond question, therefore, that a Christian brother could demand work from the church, and that the church had to furnish him with work. What bound the members together, then, was not merely the duty of supporting one another . . . ; it was the fact that they formed a guild of workers, in the sense that the churches had to provide work for a brother whenever he required it. . . . We must attach a very high degree of value to a union which provided work for those who were able to work, and at the same time kept hunger from those who were unfit for labour."<sup>15</sup>

Very high value, indeed, is to be accorded an ancient community which could sustain the needy without pauperizing them and could administer charity so well without knowledge of modern sociology or the techniques of social case work. Though early Christians were economically naive, their love which had regard only for what might benefit the neighbor made them wiser than serpents. Look now at Europe from two to ten centuries later during the Catholic middle ages, teeming with thousands of paupers considered as pitiable objects for Christians *to exercise their charity on for the sake of earning merit in heaven*. The orientation of Christian love curved inward under the guise of being turned heaven-ward. Conversely, there takes place a revival of Christian social motivation whenever love ceases to seek its own and through faith seeks only to see and serve the neighbor's need.

### ***Can Man Measure Up?***

It is, of course, another question whether any man can measure up to this test. This ethic is "scandalous" to sinful human nature. It is "other-worldly" and "super-natural," above what is natural to man. It draws a man out of the citadel of the self

15. Adolf von Harnack, I, 175-6. The passage he is commenting on reads: "If any brother has a trade let him follow that trade and earn the bread he eats. If he has no trade, exercise your discretion in arranging for him to live among you as a Christian, but *not in idleness*. If he will not do this [i.e. engage in the work you furnish him], he is trafficking with Christ. Beware of men like that."—*Didaché*, XII:3ff. cf. Paul, II Thess. 3:6-12.



into the "other world" of another's needs. But this Christian supernaturalism and otherworldliness do not subtract from the energies men may devote to practical "causes." Rather they direct energies fully toward the world of other people's interests, which for natural man is indeed another world requiring that he rise above his own nature.

### *The Peril of Idolatry*

What, then, is to be said of the prime sin of idolatry which also is fundamental in Luther's teaching? Does not trust or faith in good works, even when understood as trusting good works to benefit one's neighbor, inevitably involve a man in the sin of having faith in man, trusting some finite program for social action and devoting all possible energy to its furtherance, thus deifying or idolizing something that is merely human?

Love and devotion may be neighbor-regarding or self-regarding. These are the directions of spiritual orientation which alone make both God and the idol. Whatsoever thy heart clings to and relies upon *for thine own sake*, that is properly an idol. Self-regarding love makes a god out of any finite object or human cause it touches, and can even make an idol out of God. On the other hand, other-regarding love can exhaust all human energies without making an idol out of anything.

Continuing self-centeredness is the decisive element in all idolatry. It is the essence of idolatry that the being of the worshiper is at least subconsciously known to be contained in the object worshiped or identical with the devotee. Even worship of the true God can be, in these terms, as idolatrous as devotion to anything else. It then is not true worship of God, but rather disguised concern for the self. So with those whom Luther opposed, those seeking personal salvation by their good works, who in all their extraordinary service of God were still very ordinary men serving themselves eternally.

Any attempt by Christians today to parcel out their loyalties

does not avoid the sin of idolatry but commits it. It treats God as a fool of a God who, so long as He gets the larger share, is content that the devotion left over be given to some small service of man. Properly understood, Christian faith "enables us to go about our business and serve our neighbor"; trust in God thrusts us completely into Christian social action.

### *Faith Is Effectiveness in Love*

So faith, unless it has deeds, is dead in itself. Someone will object, "And you claim to have faith!" Yes, and I claim to have deeds as well; you show me your faith without any deeds, and I will show you by my deeds what faith is!<sup>16</sup>

Thus the author of the Epistle of James lays down two alternatives: faith without social action or faith demonstrated by social action. It is the genius of Christian ethics, however, to understand that we are not forced to choose either one or the other of these alternatives. Christian faith does not exist without leading on to social action, but Christian faith does not claim to be demonstrated by its works. Between these two alternatives stands a third: Paul's conception of the relationship between faith and deeds. This is expressed in a statement of his which may be paraphrased: ". . . in Christ Jesus no particular program for social action is valid once and for all time, neither is no social action, but only faith active in love."<sup>17</sup>

Faith active in love, or, as the older translation has it, "faith which worketh by love," is obviously not the sort of faith James opposes. It is not an inner religious feeling that is content to be unrelated to deeds. A gulf equally wide, however, separates faith active in love from the faith James commends. Christian faith of which Paul spoke is concerned only with what it can effect, not with displaying *itself* by means of its deeds. Faith active in love is concerned only to show what *love* is and to discover the neighbor's needs, not to demonstrate that it itself is faithful. While Christian faith is related to deeds

16. James 2:17, 18. (Moffatt).

17. Galatians 5:6, concerning circumcision and uncircumcision.

and cannot exist without being related to deeds, it is not self-centeredly related to them. It does not *claim* them; it *gives* them. Christian faith does not seek its own salvation, even salvation by faith, for *faith is effectiveness in love which seeks only the neighbor's good.*

## Love and Works

A theology of social action must also understand the relations between Christian love and the works of love. What then is Christian love and what are its implications for social action?

### *The Nature of Christian Love*

For Paul, Christian love is unknown except for Jesus Christ and degrees of love in Christians derivative from him. Jesus' life was one of complete humility, self-abasement, and love which sought not its own. Nevertheless, Paul attaches no great importance to any one of Jesus' deeds of love or to all of them together. The importance of Jesus' exemplary deeds of love, even his death on the cross, is caught up in a cosmic event of infinitely greater significance. In the last analysis the significant thing for Paul was not what kind of man Jesus was or what sort of death came to him. The meaning of these elements of Jesus' human life and death is included without loss in an event of even greater significance: that the pre-existent Christ became a man at all is the thing of cosmic-historical importance for human salvation and the true prototype of divine-Christian love.

Treat one another with the same spirit as you experience in Christ Jesus. Though he was divine by nature, he did not set store upon equality with God, but emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant; born in human guise and appearing in human form, he humbly stooped in his obedience even to die, and to die upon the cross. Therefore God raised him high and conferred on him a Name above all names, so that before the Name of Jesus every knee should bend. . . .<sup>18</sup>

18. Philippians 2:5-10a. (Moffatt).



### *The Man Christ Jesus*

Of course, the kind of man Jesus was is consistent with the startling fact that he was a man at all. Jesus' lifetime of humility and obedience is but a logical continuation of the great act of self-emptying by which alone the Christ could become any sort of man. Jesus' life was but an extension into human history of a line started in eternity down-going toward man. When that line comes within the range of human visibility it is an indication of its "slope" that instead of coming as the highest man the Christ came as the lowliest, that the "Jesus of history" loved men and gave up self-concern for their sakes, that he died not with acclaim as a hero but with mockery as a criminal. For Paul the nature and intensity of divine love for man is measured by the divine "stoop" or "condescension" necessary for the Christ to make himself available to man, and of course as this sort of man. This is the "spirit you experience in Christ Jesus," the "mind of Christ," and this Paul enjoins Christians to have in them and in their treatment of others. The love of God is manifest not just in this or that act of kindness which Jesus performed, or all of them together, but in that while men were still sinners Christ gave up all self-glory and died for them.

Theological statements may differ from this of Paul's, and doubtless will continue to vary from age to age. In and through them all, however, Christian love is grounded in the divine condescension toward man and in the view that Jesus is the Word of God now in flesh appearing. Not that we should simply do to others as we would be done by, or merely love our neighbors as ourselves, but that we should love our brothers as Christ who laid down his life for his friends (the Johannine writings) or love our neighbors as Christ who, while men were yet sinners and his enemies, for their sakes emptied himself of all self-concern (Paul)—this is the principle *par excellence* of Christian ethics. Christian love is: to be a Christ to our neighbors (Luther).

### *What Christian Love Permits*

The relation between such love and works Paul also makes clear, in I Corinthians. "Love and do as you *then* please" is his principle, and by definition Christian love will be pleased only by doing what the neighbor needs. Opposing a faction in the church whose slogan, quoted four times by Paul, is "Everything is now permitted," Paul counters with the theme, "Everything is now permitted *which Christian love permits.*" "Each of us must consult his neighbor's interests, not his own."<sup>19</sup> Although the practical problems with which Paul deals are those of a bygone day, so long as he sticks to teaching the Corinthians only what he understands love will teach them, he gives imperishable ethical instruction. Only when he appeals to what "surely nature herself teaches" does Paul identify himself with parochial standards about women's hairdress and such matters.<sup>20</sup> His exhortations generally have authority only as love's directions, and have in view the needs and "edification" of others. What should be done or not done in a particular instance, what is good or bad, right or wrong, what is better than or worse than something else, what are "degrees of value"—these things are in Christian ethics not known in advance or derived from some preconceived code. They are determined *backward* by Christian love from what it apprehends to be the needs of others. Christian love which teaches the Christian what to do is itself *teachable* without restriction. Solicitous love elicits from a man conformity to its own requirements and its requirements vary as the neighbor's needs and are as inflexible.

### *What Christian Love Requires*

"Everything is permitted which Christian love permits" also means "everything is required which Christian love demands." The former is Christian liberty, the latter is slavery to Christ. The former, Christian leniency; the latter, Christian self-

19. I Cor. 10:24.

20. I Cor. 11:14.

severity. Aristotelian "moderation" in all things strives to hit the "mean" between too much and too little; it is inflexible and immoderate about moderation. Paul's "all things to all men" is, in contrast, a principle of accommodation which lays down its own regulation as to when much or little should be done. By being immoderate about this one thing, namely Christian care for the neighbor's needs, Christian ethics is *on principle* alternatively more lenient and more severe with itself than any other ethic.

### ***Implications for Social Action***

The implication of these two sides of the matter for Christian social action is clear. (1) The Christian is "most free lord of all and subject to none." This is Christian leniency and flexibility in social action. "What love teaches" is not to be identified for all time and all historical or social circumstances with any particular social program such as prohibition or socialism. "In Christ Jesus, prohibition is not valid, neither is the current informal law requiring a person to drink in order to be socially acceptable; socialism is not valid, neither is private property an absolute; a rigid rule against taking life is not valid in all circumstances, neither, of course, is the opposite; the prohibition of card-playing or of gardening on Sunday is not valid, neither is the persuasion that a game of bridge is an indispensable right of man or that Sunday is the day a man has fully to himself."

Persons who desire rigid allegiance to certain programs for reform will have to go elsewhere than to Christian social theory, and they generally do: these are the fanatics for secular gospels. Christian love whose nature is to allow itself to be guided by the needs of others changes its strategy as easily as it stands fast; it does either only in accommodation to neighbor-needs. Christian ethics transcends all law, i.e., any standard or principle which, for reasons sincerely declared to be ethical, we do not allow to be breached even though other-



wise the needs of others, when alone considered, require different actions from us.

### *Love Is Not Puffed Up*

A glance at the social programs to which today both secular and religious groups are devoted leaves the impression that their inflexibility is more a vice than a virtue. They live on from selfish pride in a position once taken, not from love sticking close to human needs. On the surface and because of their numerous factions this seems especially true of leftwingers who live by opposing each other's proposals. The same, however, is also true of Catholic opposition to birth control and many a Protestant's legalistic championing of prohibition. What "surely nature herself teaches," what is taught by our party's special enlightenment or intelligence, and indeed what love *once* taught must always be held suspect enough for constant critical reexamination in the light of present neighbor-needs and available means for meeting them. Social reform movements often gain prolonged life from "pride working through selfishness," whereas "faith working through love" is a sensitive instrument responsively alert to change itself with every real change in human affairs, always keeping itself abreast with changing needs. The possession of a law—any law—"puffs up" the man pre-possessed with it. Conventional respectability puffs up the "gentleman" with self-importance. Acting according to "the principle of the thing" puffs up. Knowledge and wisdom puff up. Appreciation of high spiritual values puffs up. But love which is not puffed up does not leave men without a directive in life such as these other views supply. As Paul says, "Love builds up."<sup>21</sup> Love builds up its own self-discipline in personal living, and, though it is as variable as the neighbor's needs, love is constantly engaged in building up directives for Christian social action.

*Absolutely "everything is permitted which love permits," everything without a single exception.*

21. I Cor. 8:1.

### *Love Endureth All Things*

(2) The second implication is Christian persistence in social action. There is a Christian inflexibility which against difficult opposition and repeated rebuff gives steadfastness in action for any need love discerns. With whatever is relevant to actual need, love changes its tactic; against what is irrelevant love stands firm.

There is an interesting problem as to Paul's view of the relations among faith, hope, and love. How do these so-called "theological virtues" stand in relation to each other? This question is not to be answered simply by reference to Paul's statement that "the greatest of these is love." Throughout the letter to the Romans Paul treats faith as the "greatest," at least in the sense of the most fundamental, of the three. The order of words in the expression "faith effective through love" suggests the same thing. Faith is the foundation which sustains both hope and love though love is greater than either as an ethical quality.

In discussing Abraham's salvation in that he believed God was able and faithful to do what he had promised and would bless the nations through Abraham's seed, Paul wrote that "when hope was gone" Abraham "hoped on in faith."<sup>22</sup> This states the relation between faith and hope. A similar relation between faith and love may be attributed to Paul, and his view may be stated in a paraphrase, "When all love is gone, a Christian loves on in faith."

### *Love Never Faileth*

When all fellow-feeling and natural affection wither, when there are no grounds for love in the neighbor's apparent worth, when his response is not appreciative but to the contrary, when, in short, love that has only begun to be Christian would be destroyed by the enemy, a Christian loves on in faith. When otherwise there is no foundation or justification for love, faith

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22. Romans 4:18.

in God as known in Christ is its foundation. This is why "love never faileth." A Christian says "nevertheless" and "in spite of this" to every circumstance. So faith is constantly effective through love, and the works of love are persistently obligatory.

Absolutely "everything is required which love commands," everything without a single exception; the commands of love are as stringent as the needs of the world are urgent.

### *A Christian Is a Hyphenated Citizen*

The well-springs of Christian social action examined in the last two sections belong not to the kingdoms of this world. Yet a Christian dwells on the border between these worldly kingdoms and the kingdom of God. A Christian is a hyphenated citizen, and this hyphen and the tension it involves between the ideal and the actual must not be allowed to lapse. Christians must not suppose that their naturalization papers for the kingdom of God have finally come through, and that what has been said about faith and love is an exact description of existing Christians. Nor should they suppose that the works of faith and love are altogether laid up in heaven and do not at all characterize actual men and women.

To maintain the hyphen, and the conception of Christians as dwellers on the border, is to preserve the expectation that by Christian faith and love the kingdom itself will draw nearer and enter repeatedly into what men do. The more Christian love becomes actual in any man's relation to his neighbor, the more have the sovereignties of this world passed under the sovereignty of Christ. The fact that this must take place again in every man who comes into the world, and again for any man in every new moment of time, and never is complete in any man or moment, does not detract from the perfect picture of Christian love which, no thanks to ourselves, we have in the Christ-standard for our lives. This perfect love we are expected to actualize at any moment, or, rather, we are always expected to actualize it in the next moment. Christians expect to act from perfect Christian love at any moment, or rather,



they are always expecting so to act in the next moment. As John Wesley said of perfect, holy love, "Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment! Why not this hour, this moment?"

### ***Social Action Becomes Christian***

Christian social action and programs for reform are also hyphenated. In some degree, social legislation must be assessed according to its effectiveness for hindering hinderances to the good life; this is a negative social gospel. On the other hand, every proposal for reform must also be constantly and critically related to Christian love for neighbor. Whenever real, and to whatever degree, such love is an event in the coming of the kingdom. It is the fruitful womb from which Christian social action is repeatedly born and constantly corrected. Even as men—different men and the same man—recurringly become Christian, so social action *becomes* Christian only by recurringly taking counsel with the neighbor's needs. To be outgoing toward the well-being of others, even as Christ was in his love toward men, is an endless task but one not beset with the futility of time and times again without number, because it has the assurance of the eternal in it.

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## Good Reading

### I. THE SOCIAL GOSPEL IN AMERICA

Vernon Bodein, *The Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944.

R. H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, New York: The Ronald Press, 1940.

C. H. Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940.

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- H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937.  
 Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, New York: Macmillan, 1917.  
 D. R. Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch*, New York: Macmillan, 1942.

## II. ROMAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS

- R. G. Brehmer, Jr., *Social Doctrines of the Catholic Church*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936.  
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 Joseph Husslein (ed.), *Social Wellsprings*, Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1942.  
 Jacques Maritain, *Freedom in the Modern World*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1935.  
 John A. Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941.

## III. PROTESTANT THEOLOGIES OF SOCIAL ACTION

- Karl Barth, *This Christian Cause*, New York: Macmillan, 1941.  
 John Bennett, *Social Salvation*, New York: Scribner's, 1935.  
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 Charles D. Kean, *Christianity and the Cultural Crisis*, New York: Association Press, 1945.  
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 R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.  
 R. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, New York: Scribner's, 1944.  
 M. B. Reckitt, *Religion in Social Action*, London: The Unicorn Press, 1937.

## *Social Scene*

*The Social Gospel has roots. They run back to the Old Testament prophets, and spring from the Gospel itself. The church at its best is always alive to humanity, as Catholic charitable institutions are witness. The Protestant Church has also had a perpetual concern for the economic and social institutions under which it ministers, and for their effect upon the condition of man.*

*No better record of this concern in America is to be had than in The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915, by Charles Howard Hopkins, Yale University Press, 1940. Here is an astonishingly documented story of the spiritual movement in the half-century between the Civil War and World War I "toward the socialising and ethicising of Protestantism known as the Social Gospel." Beecher, Bascom, Gladden, Strong, Herron, Ely, Commons, Stelzle, Rauschenbusch, with a host of others, march thru these pages in a rising tide of spiritual vitality culminating in Rauschenbusch's A Theology for the Social Gospel, 1917. No one is acquainted with the roots of the Christian culture about us who has not made the material of at least these two volumes a part of his thinking.*

*What of the quarter-century since, and what now of the quarter-century next? What will this half-century render up of ethical Christianity in the final assize of spiritual history? That depends on how much the ministry and the laity are aware of the relevance of the Social Gospel.*

*Alfred W Swan*